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Building stories: Exploring participant experiences and research relationships

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In this article we present findings from two separate narrative phenomenological studies interested in the narrative representations of experiences. While meeting original research aims, unexpected accounts of the meaningful experience derived from participation in the studies emerged. The shared methodological approach is introduced, followed by explorations of time, space, actors, and scenes as co-constructed story-telling and story-making considerations. The discussion highlights that while researcher positionality is itself not a novel focus, the potential influence of engagement in research must be acknowledged. The "data" therefore transcends the narrative shared to become a secondary experience with a constitutive influence on how the research relationship and participation in research is considered, analysed and interpreted.

Keywords: empirical, ethnography, relationships, interview, meaningful experience, scene, narrative phenomenology, dialogic

Introduction

"Tell me about a time when …" the researcher asks. After a pause the research participant answers, "well, I can't think of anything specific …" At another time, in another place, an entire story emerges from a single prompt; bubbling to the surface, starting, stopping and jumping from one context to another. Not everyone considers themselves to be a natural story teller, but we are inherently narrative beings (Josselson, 2006). Stories are not "of us", they "are us" (M. Jackson, 2002), and how researchers elicit or invite them is part of the story-making process. They bring meaning to events, insight to experiences and connection to audiences, even if the stories are unrefined in construction or intention, difficult to hear, challenging to acknowledge or humbling to articulate. The aim of this article is to explore the dialogical nature of narrative research, examining the connections and constraints that locate experiences and stories in the intimate and distant space of conversation and relationship. The examples, derived from ethnographic studies, demonstrate a distinctive relational experience between researcher and participant that both draws on and informs the narrative being presented.

Relationships, stories and experiences

As this paper is primarily an exploration of the unintentional relationship between researchers and informants that influence the interview process, a useful and necessary point of departure is a discussion of dialogic relationships and the construction of narrative representations of experiences. Bakhtin (1981), a Russian literary theorist, conceptualized speech as a dialogic act where individuals draw on both outside forces and their own past. A dialogical

relationship is one where "the speaker strives to get a reading on his own word, and on his own conceptual system that determines this word, within the alien conceptual system of the understanding receiver" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 282). Particularly relevant to this paper, Mishler (1986, 2009) describes the interview as a dialogic process where the coproduced story is a negotiated agreement between the interviewer and the interviewee.

Although from a very different tradition than Bakhtin's literary analysis, Stern (2004) addresses intersubjectivity from a psychodynamic perspective; dramatic changes occur during moments of meeting where significant shared experiences alter intersubjective understandings. The emotional and physical connections occurring during moments of meeting forces the present consciousness into awareness to a point that action must be taken. Moments of meeting generate new states of being and ways of being together, whether in a therapeutic encounter or a research interview.

Stories or more specifically the facility of language to fully encapsulate the scope of experience into a narrative structure, is a widely acknowledged form of discursive practice and another means by which individuals come together (Crapanzano, 2004; de Certeau, 1984; M. Jackson, 1995). The narrative representation of experience necessitates an appreciation for the woven threads by which each story and each experience is collectively co-constructed (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). As experiences become narratives, actions and the enactment of daily life become structured through a process of emplotment, informed by past learning and projecting future possibilities (Mattingly, 2010).

Experience is often conceptualized as fluid and unbounded (Dewey, 1929) and also "double-barreled" in its multiplicity of representative forms (James, 1912): it is static and active, noun and verb, product and process (Oakeshott, 2015). The narration of experience is therefore an equally complex process; stories, as experiences, exist amidst concurrent and even competing stories and experiences. They nest together, blending ours with theirs, now

and then, and call out for a distinction between "listening to and listening for the story" (Welty, 1983, p. 4).

Interpretations and theoretical or even philosophical investigations into lived experiences and the complexity of lived worlds are the cornerstone of social and health science scholarship. Gaining prominence in this literature is positionality (Elliot, 2015a) the identification of the presence of the researcher amidst the participants and the populations being studied. However, the development of identity as a dialogical process, emphasizing the importance of being seen by others (Ortiz, 2001), is not always transparently discussed in qualitative research. When it is introduced, it is frequently and necessarily critically examined (Muhammad et al., 2015); this paper casts its gaze towards the potential of this relationality. The invitation to talk, reflect or share may create a relational context whereby a personal experience becomes appropriated into a broader system of narrative and identity formation. Researchers therefore, can be seen as contributing to a larger project of self-transformation (Taylor, 1997) through the narrative re-envisioning or re-orientation process that individuals go through in telling their stories.

The representations of experiences presented here use the stories, the landscapes and the individual storytellers as the vehicle through which to bring a new voice into their unfolding story – the narratively informed design and theoretical underpinnings of the research itself. To begin, an examination of the relational context of the narrative phenomenology (Mattingly, 2010) theoretical framework that runs throughout two distinct occupational science research projects is introduced. Reflections from participants will then be brought into analysis and discussion, considering how participant stories (experience) and researcher involvement can be empirically and meaningfully represented as co-constructions of narratives that emerged across time and space.

Narrative framing

"Narrative phenomenology recognizes the macro structural dimensions of our social existence (the way discursive regimes are embodied and played out in everyday social practice) but also foregrounds the personal, intimate, singular, and eventful qualities of social life" (Mattingly, 2010, p. 7). Building on the work of Mattingly and Lawlor (Lawlor, 2009; Lawlor & Mattingly, 1998; Lawlor & Mattingly, 2013; Mattingly, 2010) narrative phenomenology integrates the ethnographic interest in systems and structures with the micro perspectives of individuals and particularities. Less a formal methodological approach than theoretical lens informed by the diverse philosophical perspectives ranging from Aristotle to Foucault and Ricoeur, narrative phenomenology enables a researcher to explore the construction and representation of experiences and stories - the extraordinary, the ordinary, the global or the local.

The appreciation for narrative and phenomenological components of everyday experiences, in particular those of temporality, locality, and the immersive experience of researchers, is further supported by the psychoanalytic perspective of "person-centred ethnography" (Hollan, 1997, 2001) which brings the ethnographic analysis to the individual. The mutually constituting relationship between the psychological and subjective experiences and societal and cultural forces is revealed through an individual's language, action and their narrative combination (Bonsall, 2014a). "Who tells what to whom and under what circumstances" (Hollan, 2001, p. 54) has obvious pragmatic resonance; it reveals the transactional reality of actor-audience-setting in research contexts.

Narrative analysis asks how lives are defined by the stories that people are caught up in as well as the stories that are overlooked (Frank, 2010). Closely paralleling what A. Y.

Jackson and Mazzei (2017) describe as thinking with theory, such analysis does not consist of the identification of themes, but in answering questions that emerge during the research process. The authors of this article were respectively dealing with distinct texts and situations. However, both became interested in the process of how stories were concurrently expressed during the interview process and created through research interactions. Narrative phenomenology was employed by both researchers as a theoretical and methodological guide in the research design, process and analysis in two separate empirical projects. They are presented here to illuminate the relational tensions and opportunities that exist and emerge from co-constructed moments of meeting.

The first study (written by the second author in first person language) investigated the experiences of five fathers of children with disabilities. The researcher spent a one-year period engaging in interviews with and observations of the fathers and their children interacting in experiences that fathers described as meaningful. Mothers and other children also participated in group interviews, ensuring multiple perspectives were gathered. This examination of fathers allowed for an experience-near, socially and culturally informed analysis of everyday realities of fathering (Bonsall, 2014b, 2015, 2018). Narrative analysis enabled the examination of the construction and reconstruction of fathering experiences across time. This analysis provided a gaze that considered immediate parenting relationships while also reflecting larger social and cultural environments that influenced these relationships.

The second research study (first author) explored the expectant and reflective dimensions of "transformational" experiences that occur in everyday life and how the narrative representations of such experiences become situated amidst the narratives and interpretations of others. The experiences belonged to a group of twenty-four entry-level masters' occupational therapy students at an American university, who traveled abroad in

their final semester for a short-term curriculum-focused immersion opportunity to work with children with disabilities. It was a subset of a larger cohort of students and clinicians that made the journey to West Africa, the words of alumni and friends echoing in their minds and packed in their suitcases - this trip will “change your life”.

The nine-month ethnography investigated the temporal influence of anticipation, participation and reflection and the spatial dimension that different geographies play in the construction of narratives. In other words, across time and space, with individuals and small groups, interviews were conducted, written and photographic accounts were collected, overseas realities were observed, and the overarching conversation happening between and across individual-collective-societal levels was documented (Elliot, 2015a, 2015b).

Institutional review board approval was obtained for both studies. Identifiable details from all participants have been modified to assure anonymity and pseudonyms have been applied whilst retaining the integrity of the narratives.

Examples of dialogic relationships in research

A close examination of these two exemplars reveals nuanced interactions that elicited a connection between researchers and participants that transcended the requirements of an interview. The basic understandings produced during these instances combined present moments with personal experiences and reflections, resulting in stories about the past and narratives that were co-constructed through a dialogical process. In the first section, an interview with Jimmy, the father of a daughter with cerebral palsy, serves as an exemplar of an encounter that transforms the relationship between the interviewer and the participant and consequently the stories shared. The second example reflects the iterative nature of narrative

representations of experience, predicated upon time and relational familiarity. Sustained curiosity in Colleen's experiences became an opportunity for enhanced learning, insight and emotional exploration of how stories 'breathed' (Frank, 2010) within and beyond Colleen's immediate social circle.

River walk: Away from everybody for an hour

Although the interview started when I first arrived at Jimmy's house, Jimmy had participated in previous interviews and observations and we had developed a shared familiarity with conversational styles and expectations. Such familiarity had, at times, contributed to a feeling of connection; at other times, the expectations held by Jimmy and other participants did not comport with the researcher's. Considering that this study included eight interviews over the span of a year, it is not surprising that at times (especially at the end of the process) the conversation felt rehearsed or repetitive. This section focuses on an instance of familiarity that created a connection that transcended that repetitiveness of the interviews.

Contributing to the relational context of this interview were five previous interviews and one observation session. A few weeks prior to the events presented here, I had attended a t-ball game where Jimmy was the coach and his daughter Teresa was a participant (See Bonsall, 2014c). When I asked him about his impression of the research process, Jimmy talked about the t-ball game. He replied: "It's cool that you went to Teresa's games, too, to go see that." Observing his daughter's t-ball game became something that Jimmy remembered as significant about the research process.

Jimmy was waiting for me when I arrived at his house. "Let's go," he said. Although all of the past interviews had been on Jimmy's porch, on this day, we started walking. The route took us to a river-side bicycle path that bordered the predominately Hispanic community

where Jimmy lived. As will be shown, Jimmy's insistence on us walking along the river provided an opening for a narrative that blurred the lines between interview and observation. Although Jimmy was often an eager informant, our earlier interviews primarily focused on his daughter and his interactions with his daughter.

As we walked along the river, our conversation alternated between me asking questions about fathering, similar to past interviews, and his commentary on what we were seeing. Jimmy pointed out places where he had caught fish and identified community landmarks. He talked about wildlife he had seen at various points along the river. But after each of these tangents he would return the interview to a tone that felt more like past interviews as he eagerly asked, "what next?" In this instance Jimmy's desire to fulfill what he viewed as my expectations of the interview created repetitiveness in both conversation style and content that was yielding very little in terms of what we would describe as "narrative data". But the familiar question-response exchange began to transform into a different conversational rhythm when I commented on the walk.

(1)

Jimmy: Uh huh. Kind of sucks. I guess I picked it wrong, but right now there is some water damage. It's all right. But, you know, on summer days when it's real hot, and then you come in the evening when the sun's coming down and all that, and it's like, have you ever been up to the Sierra's?

Jimmy's initial disappointment with our walk led to a personal reflection on a different place and time. Though Jimmy was currently residing in the same large city where he had grown up, he had spent several years living in a secluded mountain resort. When his eldest of four

children was born, Jimmy and his spouse, chasing the promise of a stable job and greater family support, moved back to the bigger city. On certain days, the river running behind this urban community reminded him of that time when they lived in the mountains. Until this walk, Jimmy had not spoken about living in the Sierra Mountains. Jimmy invited me into his reflective space on this sunny afternoon.

(2)

Jimmy: Have you ever been to the Owen's Valley, like the Owens River? By Mammoth, down in Bishop?

Interviewer: I think I've been up there, yeah.

Jimmy: Where the hot tubs are, and the fish hatches.

Interviewer: I haven't been up to the hot tubs, no.

Jimmy: Okay, well --

Interviewer: I've been up to the area, though. Like, actually, we've been up to June Mountain area. Like, up to June Lake.

Jimmy: June Lake? I used to work up there.

Interviewer: We did some hiking around there.

Jimmy: Where, Gold Lake? Silver Lake? June Lake?

Interviewer: Onion Pass. Like along the John Muir. Is that around there?

Jimmy: Uh huh.

Interviewer: Do you know what I'm talking about?

Jimmy: Yeah. The John Muir Trail.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Jimmy: So, you went on the long hikes then?

Interviewer: Well, it wasn't that long, but, yeah, yeah.

Jimmy: Or was it like a day hike?

Interviewer: No, it was like a four, five, maybe a week.

Jimmy: Oh, really?

Interviewer: It was like 40 miles we probably did.

Jimmy: Right on, man. You heard of the Pacific Crest Trail?

Interviewer: Uh huh.

Jimmy: I did some of that, up in the Mammoth. I went up through Duck Pass, Silver Lake and all back up to Virginia Lakes. What was that? I'd say, 15 miles round trip. Got up to 12,000 feet elevation. That's when I was trying to break the California state record for golden trout.

After the interview when I looked up the specific locations I realized that though they are part of the same mountain region, Onion Pass where I had hiked was about 150 miles from the location Jimmy was referring to. Although I had not been to some of the exact places Jimmy mentioned, my familiarity with the Inyo National Forest created an opening for Jimmy to expand upon his memories of fishing in the mountains, hiking with his dogs and seeing a bear from his back porch.

This is where the experience of the interview departed from previous research encounters. When Jimmy raised an eyebrow, and replied "oh, really?" to my revelation I had spent a week hiking there it felt as if he was inspecting me, as if seeing me for the first time. I was no longer simply a researcher interested in his relationship with his daughter, but a person with similar experiences. He followed this up with a simple sign of approval, "right on, man".

As Jimmy's view of the researcher shifted, so did the content of the interview. Jimmy was no longer talking about his present existence, but reflecting back on a time when he was not constrained by responsibilities, demands, and the geographic limitations of living in a big

city. During earlier interviews, Jimmy had depicted the various ways that he interacted with the river. Jimmy had previously referred to going on walks by himself along the river when he felt overwhelmed with responsibility. He portrayed Friday night fishing with his son as his "little break". After several months of interviews, Jimmy invited me to walk along that path with him. The familiarity built during the interviews had led to a point where Jimmy initiated this further connection that went beyond discussion of every day fathering.

According to Frank (2010), hermeneutic interpretation should seek to highlight variation and possibilities in the story without saying anything that the participants would not say. I did not return to Jimmy with a recording of this story; there is no confirmation of the narrative within this conversation. Our experiences are therefore limited to our consciousness as we can never completely know another's experience (Bruner, 1986; Frank, 2010). Although after this interview I had a general feeling that something was different, it was not until I looked at the transcript that I actually could pinpoint and describe where and what had occurred. Analysis of the transcript and audio recording allowed insight into experience that was not available in the moment.

During the last interview with Jimmy he was asked what he thought about the research experience. His answer was that he looked forward to the meetings. When pressed to expand further, Jimmy explained: "To talk, I don't know. Get away. Away from my wife. Away from everybody for an hour."

In other interviews Jimmy talked about the stress that came with the responsibilities of raising a daughter with cerebral palsy, providing for his family, and protecting his children in a tough neighborhood. For Jimmy, the interview process was an opportunity to get way for an hour in ways very similar to being by the river. On this particular day, Jimmy relocated our established interview setting by greeting me with "let's go". Jimmy was not only taking me

on walk along the river, but also on a tour of his world that transcended the everyday realities of fathering.

Following the direction of travel

From the initial meeting, Colleen seemed to have an impression of how her research participation might prove personally beneficial. She was one of the first participants to sign on to the study and throughout the nine-month period, she freely sought opportunities to share her thoughts, through interviews and in reflective documents written for her university courses. The following is an excerpt from our pre-departure interview, our first meeting, conducted in an office space at her university. In the midst of talking about her learning and development goals for the international immersion opportunity, she linked them to her motivation to participate in the study. Colleen appeared to have multiple intentions with her involvement in the research.

(3)

Colleen: And another thing, I just knew this was going to be good practice talking to somebody else about my thoughts, so thank you for this opportunity. I know you keep thanking us for taking time out, but thank you. Because you are the one who's allowing us to reflect verbally, which is way better than reflecting written down.

Colleen and I met on several occasions while abroad, several months after this initial interview. The first was one week into the trip and her conversation travelled in all directions from sensory reflections, cultural insights and interpersonal dynamics. Two days before

departure back to America, Colleen was involved in a small group day trip to a local village school. In the reflective group debrief I requested that same evening, Colleen's level of engagement and amount of verbal contribution was markedly reduced from her normal and expansive connection to the individual interview process. What was not edited was her depth of consideration of issues she was attempting to comprehend.

(4)

Colleen: I know they (local school children) are excited to see us. But what do they see when they see us? Do they see like oh, yes, obruni [white person]. But do we symbolize something to them? I'm not sure. Or is it just that we're different? Um, in terms of like our skin color?

These reflections followed a discussion by her peers about the excitement they had at being surrounded by children who waved at them, shook their hands and requested photographs with them. None of her classmates embraced this reflection as an alternate discussion thread, either in agreement or challenge to their own experiences or interpretations. Colleen's apparent confusion of where issues of race and privilege existed in the group's brief encounter with the children was cast aside in the group debrief. Her peers perhaps did hear her comments but they proceeded with their own recollections from the day. Colleen was silent for the remainder of the recorded group interview.

Several weeks after returning home from the trip, Colleen and I met again, this time in the shade of the courtyard at her university. In this third phase of the narrative study, I was seeking retrospective reflections about the time in West Africa and how those experiences were, or not, being integrated into everyday life. An inevitable question Colleen likely met

from friends and family – "how was it?" – was explored in my query, mid-way through our interview.

(5)

Colleen: I didn't talk much to anybody about this trip. And, I have close friends. I have a boyfriend, and I don't feel the need or urge to talk to them about it. I think that – who knows? Is it my trip because this was for myself? Because I don't think they're going to understand.

Colleen: And, I would be so frustrated if I were to say something and not get, like, a sign from them that they understood what I was saying. Like, yeah. So I'd just rather not, and just keep it to myself. Cause I guess that's all that really matters, like – if you can keep it in your mind for as long as you can. But it does help to talk about it, which is probably why I like this so much. Cause I don't want to talk about with anyone else, if it's not going to benefit me. But remember I said talking to you benefits me, so maybe that's selfish …

At the end of this interview I asked whether she would be interested in meeting one final time prior to the completion of the study. Colleen enthusiastically responded, "Definitely! These are the best! Like thank you. Like, I wish that we could be best friends and I could come here every single week."

As arranged, Colleen and I met for a final interview. Three months and many significant life events had passed in this time period. She had graduated, had accepted her first professional position and was preparing for an intensive summer job. The transitions and

changes in Colleen's life dominated our conversation. The trip abroad, the opportunity that many, though not Colleen, had professed to have changed their life, was no longer the central feature in our interview dialogue. It was the present, not the past, which resonated most strongly. Yet Colleen retained her initial narrative and her intention for personal development. As the second author had done in the first study, a final question posed to her before formally concluding her involvement in the study invited her to share her thoughts on the research experience.

(6)

Colleen: Talking about things with someone who, like has an interest, who's listening, it helps. Because all these thoughts are up here [points to head]. But when you actually get to talk about it, you realize there's more in there than you thought. And you realize there's a lot more. And also that, as I said, you see your growth. I don't think I would have seen this growth unless I talked to someone about it. So now I can actually say, oh, I've seen myself grow.

Almost as an afterthought, Colleen added, "I think also though, because you're a stranger, not a stranger, but you're not like directly ... yeah." She did not finish this sentence, inviting me into the silence that followed to insert my own interpretive meaning.

What is presented here is not an exploration of a "single" story; she appears to be collectively and holistically recounting a cognitive and relational interpretation of her own experiences. Colleen seems to be narrating a process, depicting the impact of having been invited to construct a "chaptered" narrative of her imagined, immersion and reflective experiences. As the researcher and observer who journeyed alongside Colleen, this relational

connection to and with her narrative representations became valued and appreciated. I was "a part of and apart from" (M. Jackson, 2012, p. 7) the international experience, present but not directly involved in the university course or daily interactions abroad with the local communities. A reality evident to me through my narrative phenomenological design and recognized by Colleen – "you're a stranger, not a stranger, but you're not directly …"

In sharing tangible aspects of Colleen's experiences – the pre-departure planning, the trans-Atlantic flights, the heat, the meals, the village visits – there were some ordinary details that did not need to be articulated. Her classmates were immersed in their own respective stories, resulting in what became a difficult reconciliation of alternate or competing interpretations of a shared experience. Colleen questioned race and privilege when her peers were perhaps embracing their imagined or desired connection and affection for and with village children. Involvement in a narrative interviewing process invited Colleen to share such reflections without the immediate interpretation of her experiences being different or misunderstood. The connection between researcher and participant had been informed by a relational and frequent presence alongside the absence of a reciprocal sharing and comparing of experiences.

Her final comment that "we could be best friends" is a curious one; Colleen knew very little about me, yet felt a strong and trusted bond. As documented in a field note, I was interested in this perspective.

> My intention of gathering stories and considering the broader narratives of possible transformation resulted in the creation of relational research space that felt valued and secure. Is reticence to share with others predicated on a lack of perceived understanding then? The fear of the unrefined or incomplete narrative? Or perhaps a

commentary on the value of participant-observation in bearing witness to and sharing in everyday moments?

The questions posed throughout the study were inspired by the expansive and inclusive research aims pertaining to the construction of "life changing" narratives. They invited participants to reflect on impressions, expectations, experiences and actions, developing language and articulation in the narrative representation of the same. For Colleen, this was a motivating variable for her participation in the research. Her experiences over the course of the study suggest that there was "something more" as well; the construction of the story rests upon having an audience with whom to share it. Like Jimmy, Colleen appeared to experience the research process and the time available to cast their eye towards themselves, to be deeply valuable and resonant.

Discussion

In the interview with Jimmy, the geographic setting of the narrative "scene", walking along a river, transformed reflections of fathering into stories of a former life in the mountains. We use the term "scene" as the contexts that influence actors and actions ranging from physical space to emotional environments. The scene shifted from a cement slab in an urban neighborhood to an "as if" reality of walking along a path in the Sierras. Crapanzano (2006) argues that imaginative scenes color the experience of subjective reality; Jimmy was "getting away" from his chaotic and demanding social environment by walking and talking with the researcher. Though still in the same physical place, this shift in the scene evoked an imaginative realm that introduced a life away from the immediate setting.

For Colleen and the researcher in the second example, the expansion of the scene was a shared journey across time and space, contexts and situations. These excerpts also suggest that the process of narration within a research study subsume meaning beyond the intended objectives or focus of enquiry. The research process for Colleen was experienced as an opportunity to talk and be heard in ways that she was not able to with her friends. Conversely, for the researcher, the intention of conducting interviews was imagined as the conduit through which a deeper understanding of experiences might be gained; secondary objectives by which the participants might gain personal benefit was not originally considered.

This is particularly salient in Colleen's need to speak about experiences that she believes no one else will understand. "Who tells what to whom" (Hollan, 2001, p. 54) is a useful reminder in the analytic process; the expansion of the scene to include the intentions and dialogic nature of research can influence the resulting narrative data.

In recognizing the co-construction of narratives, often referred to as "data" in qualitative research approaches, we avoid the humanist trappings of discovering pre-existing stories. Instead we view qualitative inquiry as a process that incites "change, movement, and transformation" (A. Y. Jackson & Mazzei, 2017, p. 727). For the actors in this research (both researcher and participants) the research process led to changes in not only how events were narrated, but also in how they were experienced. Stern's (2004) theoretical concept of moments of meeting helps to expand the understanding of the interactions that emerged during the research process. In both examples, intersubjectivity was altered.

The two experiences described here highlight the unanticipated beneficial outcomes of sharing personal experiences; memories of times past in the mountains or moments shared in another country, both altered the positions of the researchers alongside the participants within the scene. The interpersonal relationship and associated objectives for involvement in research are not solely within the domain of personal development or shared narratives.

Ethical tensions, emotional discomfort and empirical uncertainty may also arise. However, it is also worth recognizing the possible therapeutic value of being and doing together. Notably, the basis of psychotherapy as described by Stern (2004) are emotional and relational changes that result from moments of meeting through shared experiences. The research process can provide a novel context for remembering and rewrite the past records in the course of experience, producing changes in the functional past that mirror the effects of therapy.

Tracing the influence of the outside forces on storytelling reveals stories not just as realities told, but conceptualized and created through common experience. Ricœur (1984) describes this process of mimesis, or emplotment of experience, as including three senses: a pre-understanding of the world, a gathering together of these elements, and a telling of the story for interpretation by the listener. The interactions described in this article encompass more than the stories shared. They reveal emplotment as the present moment inspires stories of the past and meaning is developed through narration. The researcher and the environment are therefore not static receptacles of the story. Rather they are dynamic narrative actors, co-constructing story components that reveal a new story of experience.

Conclusion

The process of bearing witness to experiences and stories is central to narrative phenomenology. The presence of an engaged observer is valuable as it permits an examination of the moments of significance and mundane and casts new light onto their interpretive potential. That is, of course, for the benefit of the researcher. For participants, this gaze may serve to challenge what Ricœur (1984) suggests is a “fear of the absence of our presence” (p. 16) in our everyday lives. Jimmy thought it “was cool” that a researcher wanted

to enter his fathering reality and then later discovered a deeper connection with the researcher in the permission to “get away” for a while. Colleen felt a kinship with the researcher that permitted articulation of impressions and reflections that she withheld from her immediate social network. Positioning the researcher as both best friend and stranger reveals an ongoing intersubjective tension from which the emplotment of her narrative construction of travelling abroad arises.

In analyzing these stories, we gain insight into the temporal, symbolic, and structural pre-understandings that influence the framing and narration of specific life events and moments. Narrative phenomenology, as a methodology and an analytic tool, provides a lens through which to examine both stories and their broader constitutive influences. By approaching “data” with an eye to the multiple social spaces, time horizons and co-constructed relational identities, in addition to the articulated content, we have highlighted the nuances and complexity inherent in narratives of everyday experiences.

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